DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 813 TM 034 818

AUTHOR	Maurice, John M.; Karr-Kidwell, P. J.
TITLE	Accountability Issues for Instructional Leadership: Field Research, Site-Based Management, and a Campus Action Plan.
PUB DATE	2003-03-24
NOTE	24p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accountability; *High Stakes Tests; *Instructional Leadership; Middle School Students; *Middle School Teachers; Middle Schools; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Surveys; *Test Use
IDENTIFIERS	*Teaching to the Test

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to use data collected from a field research project to enable teachers and instructional leaders to understand and overcome the problems associated with high-stakes testing, especially as they relate to the narrowing of the curriculum. In spring 2001, 27 of the 48 teachers at a middle school in Texas responded to a survey of beliefs and opinions regarding the effects of standardized testing. Respondents registered strongly negative feelings and opinions about standardized testing, with more than 8 in 10 strongly agreeing or agreeing that they felt pressured by standardized testing, and 96.3% agreeing that their students felt pressured as well. Respondents generally agreed that they sometimes taught to the test (70.3%), that they taught test taking strategies to their students (92.1%), that they were compelled to adjust their lesson plans to accommodate standardized testing needs (59.2%), and that they felt the need to devote special attention to students with limited English proficiency to prepare them for the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The one area of positive impact identified by teachers was that standardized testing had not reduced the number of elective courses available to students. Three appendixes contain the survey and response information. (Contains 48 references.) (SLD)

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ACCOUNTABILITY ISSUES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: FIELD RESEARCH, SITE-BASED MANAGEMENT, AND A CAMPUS ACTION PLAN

John M. Maurice, M.Ed.
Birdville ISD
Middle School Teacher
Masters, Texas Woman's University

PJ Karr-Kidwell, Ph.D.
Professor, Educational Administration
College of Professional Education
Texas Woman's University

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Introduction

Most educators feel frustrated by the problems which beset the present system of high-stakes accountability. These include everything from test anxiety (Bracey, 1999; Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998; Harrington-Lueker, 2000) to loss of instructional time (Baresic & Gilman, 2001; Haladyna, Haas, & Allison, 1998). It is the mixing of education with business and politics which has produced such an array of unintended negative consequences. Many business leaders and politicians support high-stakes testing (Baresic & Gilman, 2001; Dobbins, 2001; Merrow, 2001; Metcalf, 2001; Phelps, 2000; Thernstrom, 2000) and are hard at work reshaping education to make it fit the business paradigm (Haladyna et al., 1998; Kohn, 2001; Phelps, 2000; Popham, 1999). As a result, educators are faced with an inappropriate system of measurement (Bracey, 2000; Haladyna et al., 1998; Thernstrom, 2000; Sacks, 1997) which is fraught with problems (Fox, 2001; Lee, 2003).

Review of Related Literature

As test anxiety and pressures to improve test scores mount, high-stakes tests have come to dictate the scope and direction of instructional programs in schools across the nation (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998; Fox, 2001; Harrington-Lueker, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001; Lombardi, 1999; Mitchell, 1997; Sacks, 1997; Wasserman, 2001). Donegan and Trepanier-Street (1998) surveyed teachers and students at both elementary and secondary levels. Among the elementary teachers, 73% reported personal stress occasionally to consistently, but among the secondary teachers, 96.3%

reported the same degree of personal stress. Anxiety due to standardized testing was reported by 92.9% of secondary students and 68.1% of elementary students. The researchers concluded that pressures to improve test scores have caused a narrowing of the curriculum to those areas and skills covered on the tests and have resulted in class time being used to teach test-taking skills. Karen Mitchell (1997) conducted a study of principals' opinions regarding high-stakes testing. In general, the principals who participated believed that the tests drive their educational programs. The most interesting and revealing studies of the effects of high-stakes testing employed taped interviews with teachers and administrators. George Perreault (2000) conducted a study in which teachers were interviewed in regard to the impact that state-mandated testing had on their classes. Teachers reported that their instructional programs were severely restricted after they were ordered not to teach anything that was not on the test. Pressures from high-stakes tests have caused standardization of the curriculum. Teachers further reported that the testing process had restricted their classroom autonomy and had weakened their sense of professionalism.

Other researchers have identified numerous problems related to high-stakes testing, which include: narrowing of the curriculum, including teaching to the test (Bracey, 2000; Clarke, 2000; Kelsey, 2001; Lombardi, 1999; Perreault, 2000; Sacks, 1997; Schrag, 2000); test anxiety (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998; Harrington-Lueker, 2000); misuse of test scores for accountability (Baresic & Gilman, 2001; Haladyna et al., 1998; Sacks, 1997; Schrag, 2000); changing the educational emphasis from learning to testing (Baresic & Gilman, 2001; Clarke, 2000; Lewbel & Hibbard, 2001); loss of instructional time (Baresic & Gilman, 2001; Kohn, 2001); shifting the

focus away from more accurate measurements (Kohn, 2001; Sacks, 1997; Thernstrom, 2000); tempting educators to cheat (Baresic & Gilman, 2001; Perreault, 2000); using test results for sorting, tracking, and labeling (Bracey, 2000; Haladyna et al., 1998; Sacks, 1997); and reliance on a single measurement that correlates closely with the income and educational level of parents and that correlates poorly with academic success (Sacks, 1997; Thernstrom, 2000). In short, too many important decisions are based on the results of poorly designed and inappropriately used measurements. Everyone in education, students and educators alike, suffers from test anxiety and the consequences of a narrowed curriculum.

John Holloway (2001), project director for the Educational Testing Service, is a staunch defender of standardized tests, but he also has stated that they have been used inappropriately in the context of educator accountability. A survey of teachers, carried out by Mary Donegan and Mary Trepanier-Street (1998), indicates that educators agree. While 82% of teachers in their study agreed or strongly agreed that standardized testing should be used to chart children's progress, 88% opposed using the tests to compare teachers within a school, and 75% opposed using the tests to compare teachers within a district. It is not so much the tests as the ways in which they are being used that cause teachers to be concerned (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998; Sacks, 1997). Standardized tests are routinely used to evaluate schools, to evaluate teachers, for promoting students, and for making instructional decisions (Haladyna et al., 1998; Holloway, 2001; Popham, 2001) in spite of the fact that they were not designed to be used in those ways (Haladyna et al., 1998; Popham, 1999; Sacks, 1997; Scherer, 2003).

All problems related to standardized testing are the concern of instructional leaders, who are also responsible for supervision and evaluation of teachers, training, setting of academic standards, selection of teaching materials, collaborative planning, and setting high expectations and clear goals for students and teachers (Rudner & Boston, 2003; Smith & Piele, 1997). Instructional leadership, especially the ability to raise test scores, has increasingly become the major criterion by which educational leaders are judged (Hale & Usdan, 2000). Teacher evaluations, in turn, and the rewards and sanctions which flow from them, are based in great part on the results of standardized tests (Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001). Focusing on such a narrow measure of teacher performance has the disadvantage of shifting the instructional leaders' attention away from important teaching proficiencies. Although professional growth requires that teachers recognize their weaknesses and strengths (Howard & Mc Closkey, 2001), standardized test scores provide, at best, only one indicator of teacher competencies (Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001; Iwanicki, 2001; Peterson, Wahlquist, Bone, Thompson, & Chatterton, 2001). In the field of supervision and evaluation, instructional leaders strive to balance the need for higher test scores with the greater need to ensure positive learning environments (Tell, 2001). Unfortunately, according to the present concept of accountability, the two needs are incompatible (Sacks, 1997).

The balance tips in favor of test results as all of the pressures associated with high-stakes testing exercise their profound influence over campus concerns. Kohn (2001) and Danielson (2001) found that the tests tend to limit the range of elective course offerings and to reduce the array of instructional methodologies employed in classrooms. Fox (2001) supports those findings, adding that in order to raise test scores, schools have

eliminated art and language classes as well as the in-depth components of non-elective courses. Programs in the arts, electives, and activities for the promotion of values and social skills have been eliminated as the tests have become the focus of education (Kohn, 2001). Educational leaders operate in a system of sanctions and rewards, and they often succumb to the pressure to eliminate anything from the curriculum which does not promise to raise test scores. Test results are used to compare schools (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998; Kohn, 2001) and to make important decisions regarding funding, accreditation, and the salaries of teachers and administrators (Schrag, 2000). Teachers view the test as the enemy of innovative teaching (Schrag, 2000) and an assault on intellectual freedom (Thernstrom, 2000). High-stakes testing affects teachers' sense of professionalism and restricts their autonomy in the classroom (Perreault, 2000). Nor are students immune to the pressures of high-stakes testing (Sacks, 1997). Test results affect graduation (Bracey, 2000) and promotion (Baresic & Gilman, 2001) and are in great measure responsible for the student dropout rate (Fox, 2001; Thernstrom, 2000).

Student concerns are central to the work of educational leaders, and principals recognize that standardized tests affect the entire educational focus (McCollum, 2001). High-stakes tests can lead to a narrow definition of educators' effectiveness (Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001), and even educational leaders, who were formerly judged successful if they possessed strong interpersonal skills, must now demonstrate their ability to raise test scores (Hale & Usdan, 2000; Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001). Pressures to perform well on the test can lead administrators to adopt a top-down management style (Adams, 2001), which is noteworthy, since research points to a relationship between organizational climate and student achievement (Parish, 2002). Accountability as it now exists often

thwarts school reform efforts (Mitchell, 1997). A study, in which Mitchell (1997) interviewed 20 principals of reforming schools, demonstrated that reform efforts were hampered by accountability systems which were tied to high-stakes test scores. Principals described the tests as barriers to their restructuring plans, adding that the tests were devastating to multi-disciplinary teaching.

Teachers have a somewhat different perspective on high-stakes testing. They often experience a feeling of powerlessness and anger (Perreault, 2000) at having to cope with a system which rewards superficial thinking (Brayton, 2002; Sacks, 1997) and which relies on inappropriate measurement (Barrow, 2002; Kelsey, 2001; Popham, 1999). The tests are not only inadequate for measuring many types of student growth (Prescott, 2001; Rotberg, 2001) but, when they are misused for accountability purposes, they fail to recognize the multifaceted nature of good teaching practice (Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001; Peterson et al., 2001; Sawyer, 2001). Teachers see more clearly than anyone else the ways in which high-stakes testing affects their students. Students with limited English proficiency (Haladyna et al., 1998) and special education students (Lombardi, 1999) are decidedly disadvantaged in a system in which the focus is on testing (Schrag, 2000). Teachers must often set aside good teaching practice (Harrington-Lueker, 2000) in order to drill test-taking skills (Haladyna et al., 1998) in spite of the fact that no evidence exists that the high-stakes accountability system has improved student performance (Bracey, 1999; Sacks, 1997; Yearwood, 2002). Many teachers have become so disenchanted with the present system of increased accountability and eroding standards (Rotberg, 2001; Tell, 2001) that they abandon the teaching profession altogether (Schrag, 2000).

It is clear that the enormous challenges presented by accountability in its present form require the cooperation and collaboration of all stakeholders. This can be accomplished by the site-based decision making committee (SBDM), which seeks to improve student performance through the widespread participation of all stakeholder groups (Wyman, 2000) in a process of bottom-up decision making (Hale & Usdan, 2000). Educational leaders can assist in the planning process by providing research-driven proposals for consideration. John Holloway (2000) offers suggestions to overcome the negative effects of high-stakes testing, including the following: avoiding use of a single measure of student performance, avoiding comparisons between schools, recognizing and reporting the degree of uncertainty of test results, and ensuring that those who make decisions are proficient in interpreting test results. James Popham (2001) adds that standardized tests should never be used for evaluation of schools, evaluation of teachers, promoting or grading students, or for making classroom instructional decisions. Haladyna et al. (1998) caution that tests must be sensitive to age, ability, gender, culture, language, and race. The researchers also warn that tests should be used only for their intended purpose and that administrators must ensure that schooling is both psychologically correct and morally prudent. Mitchell (1997) emphasizes that student performance must be monitored by using a broad range of outcomes rather than relying on a single measure of student achievement. Decision makers must also take into account diverse models of comprehensive school reform (Cross, 2000); however, it must be recognized that sustainable reform can be achieved only by first making necessary changes in the school culture (Smith & Piele, 1997). The school principal and the SBDM can work together to

foster a school culture which can neutralize the negative effects of the present system of high-stakes assessment. Educational researchers have already pointed the way.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of high-stakes testing illustrates how mixing education with politics has produced a plethora of unintended negative consequences. These will likely proliferate now that the federal government has entered the high-stakes arena (Fox, 2001; Lombardi, 1999; Metcalf, 2001). Since the early 1980s, high-stakes standardized testing has spread dramatically from state to state, to the dismay of educators (Baresic, 2001; Haladyna et al., 1998; Lombardy, 1999; Schrag, 2000). Among those who favor more stringent testing are policy makers and business leaders who are convinced that tough standards and accountability will save the nation's schools. Many leaders seem to believe that educators will do a better job of teaching as the pressure for tougher standards increases. President George W. Bush has called for national tests, and Congress has responded favorably. Some form of federally-imposed high-stakes testing will soon, no doubt, raise the stakes to unprecedented heights (Fox, 2001). Federal funds could then be withheld from schools that perform poorly. As a result, schools that are most in need of assistance may soon lose funding due, in part, to socioeconomic and demographic factors which are largely beyond their control (Kohn, 2000; Kohn, 2001; Lombardi, 1999; Popham, 1999; Sacks, 1997). Worse than the loss of funds will be the continued narrowing of the instructional program as teachers across the nation devote their energies to preparing students for state and federal tests in lieu of more creative and worthwhile classroom activities.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to employ data collected from a field research project to enable teachers and instructional leaders to understand and overcome the problems associated with high-stakes testing, especially as they relate to the narrowing of the curriculum. Findings of the study will be presented to the SBDM committee for action. The campus plan will then be amended to include a program of remedial action.

Procedures

In the spring of 2001, 27 of the 48 teachers then on staff at Smithfield Middle School responded to a survey of beliefs and opinions regarding the effects of standardized testing, the Survey of Educator Opinion: Standardized Testing (See Appendix A). No members of other stakeholder groups participated in the survey. The survey consisted of 12 items which were designed to determine educators' opinions and beliefs regarding the efficacy of high-stakes tests in measuring student achievement and the impact of the tests on student and teacher performance.

As of the fall of 2002, the survey of educator opinion at Smithfield Middle School and findings from the literature, such as misuse of test scores for accountability (Bracey, 2000; Thernstrom, 2000), narrowing of the curriculum (Bracey, 2000; Perreault, 2000), and test anxiety (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998), will be presented to decision makers on campus. A comparison of the two sources will emphasize the extent to which they support one another. The results and conclusions of the present study will be

presented to the SBDM committee to guide committee members in formulating a plan of remedial action.

Results

The educators who participated in the Survey of Educator Opinion: Standardized Testing in the spring of 2001 taught at Smithfield Middle School in the Birdville Independent School District, North Richland Hills, Texas. The school, which had attained the Texas Education Agency's exemplary rating, then employed 48 teachers, of whom 27 responded to the questionnaire. Four of the respondents taught elective courses. Respondents' answers regarding standardized testing reflected their experience in preparing students for and administering the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The teachers who participated in the study had an average of 11 years of classroom teaching experience. Data were compiled and used to construct a table of results.

The respondents registered strongly negative feelings and opinions about standardized testing. More than 8 in 10 (81.4%) strongly agreed or agreed that they felt pressured by standardized testing, and 96.3% strongly agreed or agreed that their students felt pressured as well. Participating teachers at Smithfield Middle School also strongly agreed or agreed that they sometimes taught to the test (70.3%), that they taught test-taking strategies to their students (92.1%), that they were compelled to adjust their lesson plans to accommodate standardized testing needs (59.2%), and that they felt the need to devote special attention to students with limited English proficiency in order to prepare them for the TAAS (70.3%). In addition, 70.3 % of the respondents reported that their

students were sometimes "pulled out" of class in order to receive special TAAS remediation. Teachers in the study also strongly agreed or agreed that both instructional time and instructional options had been reduced by standardized testing, 88.8% and 81.4%, respectively. The most important consideration, of course, is the impact of standardized testing on the ability of students to perform well and learn. Fifty-five and one-half percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that standardized testing had produced a negative effect on student performance. Additionally, 72.3% of the respondents felt that standardized tests failed to measure the most important aspects of student learning.

The survey also revealed that, although there exists a high degree of negative beliefs and opinions regarding standardized testing among those surveyed, there was one area of positive reporting. In general, participating teachers reported little impact of standardized testing on the number of elective courses offered at the school. No respondents strongly agreed that standardized testing had caused the school to offer fewer electives, and 25.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. It should be noted that beginning with the fall semester of 2002, Birdville ISD schools no longer offer ESL classes. Instead, students with limited English proficiency attend a "newcomer class" for 2 semesters (See Appendix B).

Conclusions

One must wonder to what extent, if any, that decision was influenced by the quest for higher test scores. The Survey of Educator Opinion: Standardized Testing demonstrated that respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the instructional program at

Smithfield Middle School had been narrowed in terms of instructional options, by the pressure teachers were under to produce high TAAS scores, by the resultant tendency to "teach to the test," by time lost in teaching test-taking strategies, by the disruptive effects of having students "pulled out" of their classes for TAAS remediation, and by the adjustments they were required to make regarding their lesson plans. Furthermore, the survey of literature and the Survey of Educator Opinion: Standardized Testing reinforce one another to a high degree. The teacher opinion survey conducted by Donnegan and Trepanier-Street (1998) and the interviews of Perreault (2000) yielded findings similar to those of the survey of teachers at Smithfield Middle School. It is clear from the data that action is needed to address the problems at issue in the present study.

The data indicate that the SBDM will need to provide remedies with regard to educating stakeholders, conducting more detailed research, and possibly considering alternatives to the present accountability system. Educating the public about teacher perspectives can be a part of the process. It is also important for all parties to understand the limitations of the tests and how to interpret test scores (Donnegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998). Examplary schools like Smithfield Middle School are in the best position to downplay the relative importance of test scores, especially with regard to their illegitimate use in comparing teachers within a school and in comparing one school to another.

The availability of information is another important concern. The SBDM might consider creating a collection of literature related to standardized testing so that educators and other interested parties could become more fully aware of the issues concerning the present system of accountability through testing. Ongoing research is also needed. Test

anxiety is just one example of test-related issues that should be thoroughly researched. A committee appointed by the SBDM could do research and make a report of its findings. The survey of teacher opinion conducted in 2001 needs to be updated and complemented with a series of interviews like those carried out by other researchers (Haladyna et al., 1998; Mitchell, 1997; Perreault, 2000).

Interviews, with their open-ended questions, have the potential to illuminate the subject of high-stakes testing in ways which surveys alone cannot (See Appendix C). Finally, in order to divorce student assessment from teacher accountability, the SBDM might consider alternative methods of assessment, such as performance testing. The possibility of lobbying the district office for the creation of an alternative system of assessment, subject to state approval, might also be explored. The scope of the problem under discussion calls for creativity. The task ahead is daunting, but the search for imaginative solutions can bring about change, if only one step at a time.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SURVEY OF EDUCATOR OPINION: STANDARDIZED TESTING

PURPOSE: This survey is designed to learn more about your opinions and attitudes in regard to standardized testing. The answers you give will be completely confidential. You need not sign your name or identify yourself in any way. Please answer the following general questions before completing the survey:

1. Do you teach a core subject or an elective?_____
2. How many years have you been teaching?_____
3. Please list the standardized tests which you have administered or with which you have been involved during the last 5 years. These could include TAAS, DAT, EOC, SAT (Word Bowl), or others (please specify)_____

INSTRUCTIONS: To the left of each statement below, there is a series of 5 answer boxes. Please check the box that corresponds to your opinion or attitude regarding the statement. Below is a list of the responses from which you may choose:

SA = Strongly agree
A = Agree
N = Neutral
D = Disagree
SD= Strongly disagree

	SA	A	N	D	SD	
1.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing has had a negative effect on student performance.
2.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing has sometimes caused me to "teach to the test."
3.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing causes me to feel pressured.
4.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing causes my students to feel pressured.
5.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing has caused our school to offer fewer electives.
6.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Students have sometimes been "pulled out" of my class for TAAS remediation.
7.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	My LEP (limited English proficiency) students require special attention on my part in order to prepare for the TAAS.
8.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	I must sometimes teach TAAS strategies.
9.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing has had the effect of narrowing instructional options in the classroom.
10.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing has reduced the time allotted to classroom instruction.
11.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Standardized testing measures the most important aspects of student achievement.
12.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Administrators sometimes require me to make adjustments to my lessons in order to achieve higher standardized test scores (TAAS).

APPENDIX B

Table of Survey Data

Survey Questions	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. Standardized testing has had a negative effect on student performance.	6	9	7	5	0
	22.2%	33.3%	25.9%	18.5%	0.0%
2. Standardized testing has sometimes caused me to "teach to the test."	13	6	3	4	1
	48.1%	22.2%	11.1%	14.8%	3.7%
3. Standardized testing causes me to feel pressured.	13	9	3	2	0
	48.1%	33.3%	11.1%	7.4%	0.0%
4. Standardized testing causes my students to feel pressured.	14	12	1	0	0
	51.9%	44.4%	3.7%	0.0%	0.0%
5. Standardized testing has caused our school to offer fewer electives.	0	6	14	5	2
	0.0%	22.2%	51.9%	18.5%	7.4%
6. Students are sometimes "pulled out" of my class for TAAS remediation.	12	7	3	4	1
	44.4%	25.9%	11.1%	14.8%	3.7%
7. LEP students require special attention to prepare them for the TAAS.	13	6	4	4	0
	48.1%	22.2%	14.8%	14.8%	0.0%
8. I must sometimes teach TAAS strategies.	18	7	2	0	0
	66.2%	25.9%	7.4%	0.0%	0.0%
9. Standardized testing has had the effect of narrowing instructional options.	13	9	5	0	0
	48.1%	33.3%	18.5%	0.0%	0.0%
10. Standardized testing has reduced the time allotted to classroom instruction.	17	7	2	1	0
	62.9%	25.9%	9.4%	3.7%	0.0%
11. Standardized testing measures the most important aspects of learning.	0	1	7	9	10
	0.0%	3.7%	25.9%	33.3%	39.0%
12. Administrators require me to make adjustments to my lessons for TAAS.	5	11	7	3	1
	18.5%	40.7%	25.9%	11.1%	3.7%

APPENDIX C

Suggested Interview Questions

1. How accurate are standardized tests as a measure of student achievement?

2. How accurate are standardized tests as a measure of teacher competency?

3. How do you feel about linking accountability to standardized test scores?

4. What are some of the problems associated with high-stakes testing?

5. What, if anything, do the tests fail to measure?

6. Has standardized testing impacted your classroom instruction? If yes, how?

7. What other concerns or comments do you have regarding standardized tests?

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Signature: John Maurice / RJ Karr-Kidwell

Printed Name/Position/Title: RJ Karr-Kidwell, Professor

Organization/Address: Texas Woman's Univ., College of Prof. Educ., Ed-Admin, P.O. Box 425769, Denton, TX 76204-5769

Telephone: (940) 898-2246

FAX: (940) 898-2209

E-Mail Address:

Date: 3/24/2003